

Brief Encounter

The BBC's 2010 Winter Olympics spot

Marc Craste and the Studio AKA 3D team reveal how the London animation studio produced the trail for BBC Sport's coverage of the Vancouver Winter Olympics



— The director
Marc Craste

Director Marc Craste worked for studios in Sydney and Copenhagen before joining London's Studio AKA. He won a BAFTA for animated short *JoJo in the Stars* in 2004 and has also been a previous AOI Illustrator of the Year.

Craste talks us through the production process of the BBC's 2010 Winter Olympics spot, with input from Will Eagar, Adam Avery and Rob Chapman of the 3D team.
www.studioaka.com

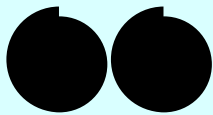
— The brief
BBC 2010 Winter Olympics spot

The brief from agency RKCR/Y&R, commissioned for the BBC through Red Bee Media, was to base the film around an Inuit hero's quest. The hero would use a series of winter sports to recover a stolen stone, restoring light and peace to a dark and troubled world.

Studio AKA pitched for the work through Red Bee Media, and Craste's designs won over the client. The studio produced a 40-second spot and a 30-second title sequence, with backgrounds crafted by Jon Klassen, who was illustrator for Henry Selick's Oscar-nominated stop-motion film *Coraline*.

Media

— Autodesk — Avid
— Softimage ICE — Flash
— After Effects

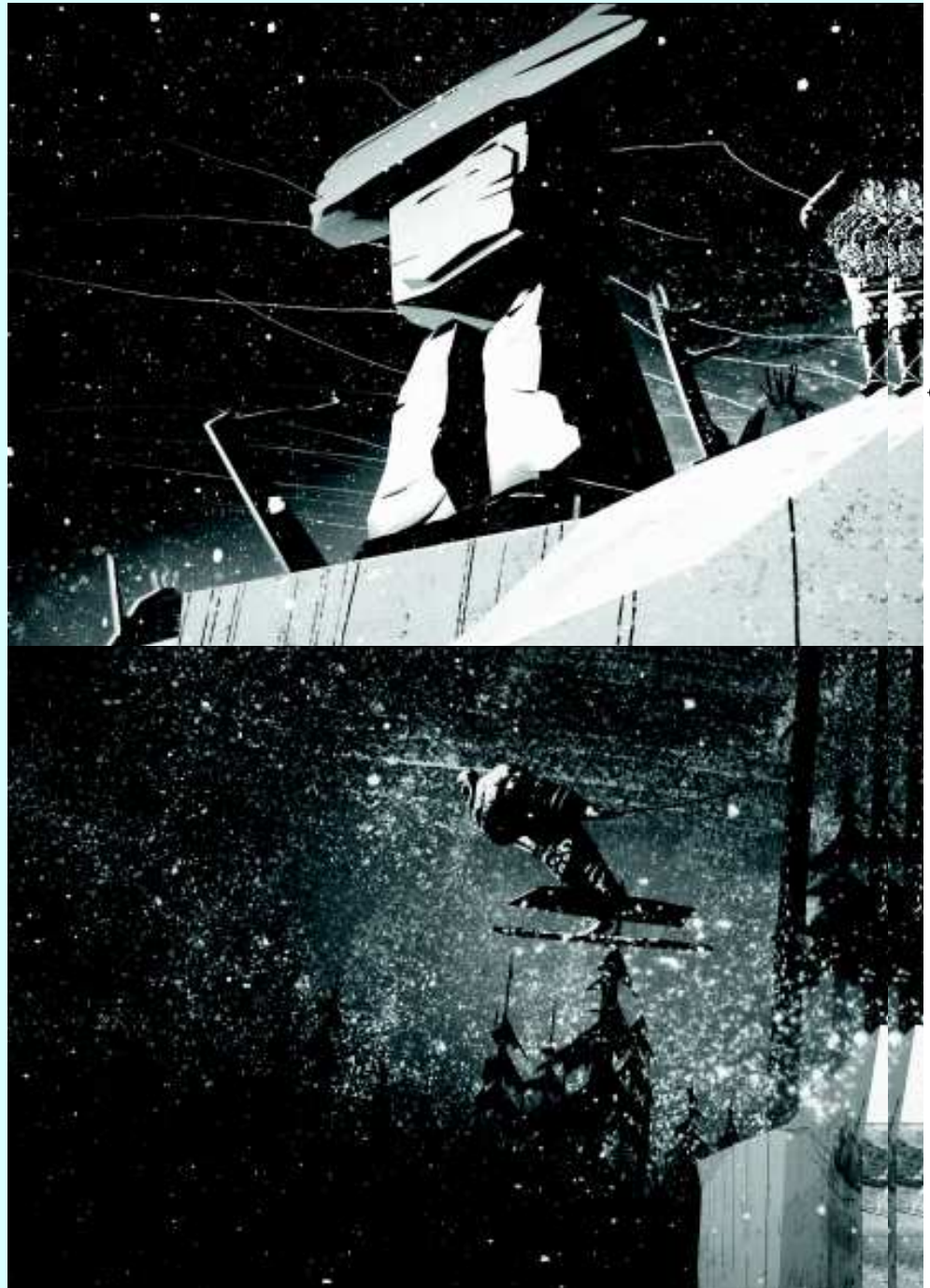


Marc Craste: Starting the story

The BBC and Red Bee Media came to us with a pretty clear idea of what they wanted. There were concerns about how successfully the job would convey the spirit of the Winter Olympics, but once everyone was reassured that it could work, it was pretty much smooth sailing. There was a mandatory logo to be featured at the end of the 30-second titles sequence – otherwise, we weren't tied into any other branding.

"The script suggested a very cinematic feel. The trail needed to capture the excitement of various winter sports, all couched in the story of a mythical quest. It had to be eye-catching, exciting and memorable, and they wanted it quite dark, which was unusual. The script was also way too long, so the first thing was to condense the story.

"Originally, the idea was for the hero to retrieve five stones hidden throughout the landscape, using a different sport for each. But the set-up time for each scenario was prohibitive and there was a danger of not having enough screen time for the sports



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01 The Vancouver Winter Olympics spot was produced by **Studio AKA** and is based on the idea of a hero's quest

02 These **action poses** show the hero engaged in different winter sports, including skiing, skating and snowboarding

03 The stylised design, developed by director **Marc Craste** with input from agency **RKCR/Y&R**, is evident in this early version of the spot's ursine villain



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03



themselves, so we decided to have the hero use all the sports on his journey to rescue one stone.

"The problem then shifted to portraying the various sports and the transition from one to another. We solved this by having the hero use a large slab of rock as a snowboard up front, and then chipping away at it, bit by bit, so it could become skis, a sled, skates and so on.

"The agency was clear that a flattened, graphic novel feel should be applied to the animation. This also informed our approach to the staging and camera angles to an extent – we felt it was important to incorporate some of the sensibilities of graphic novels without becoming too hung up on conventions that might be limiting. We avoided looking too closely at any particular reference, instead relying on the general feel to inform our decisions.

"It took around two months from the pitch to the start of production. It was a fairly protracted process, starting with the pitch drawings from the initial agency treatment and script, and involving around 75 exceptionally detailed storyboards and numerous sketches of the way the character would look during the various sports portrayed, as well as the general look of the world we were going to build in CG.

"At the same time as the pre-viz started, we brought [co-designer] Jon Klassen on board to flesh out the initial →

Technique

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04 As well as the Inuit hero, the spot features a **cast of extras**, all designed in bold monochrome

05 The **3D team** struck a balance between graphic novel-style flatness and 3D texture, using mbFeatherTools to model the wolves' fur

06-07 Co-designer **Jon Klassen** built upon the initial artwork, providing scenes that could be used as sets in CG



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→ designs. He provided key frames for the environments featured, as well as designs for elements such as trees, boulders, tents and glaciers. These were then built as props and sets in CG. In tandem with this, the CG department modelled and rigged the character, prepping him for animation.

"Theoretically, anything was possible with the camera, but we wanted to keep it fairly immobile and have the action create the excitement, which felt truer to the sports we were depicting."

Over to Will Eagar of the 3D team

"We had to find a balance between 2D and 3D, making decisions on when to physically build a background element but then texture and light it in a flat, graphic way, and when to use a more cut-out approach. Often it's not until you see the shot moving with the camera that you see if you have the balance right. With some shots, we might stop and think they felt too 3D, and sometimes we felt things had gone too flat, so there was a certain amount of going back and forth."

The 3D team's Adam Avery on fur effects

"Because of the highly stylised look of the ad, we decided conventional fur techniques would be inappropriate. After trying a few different in-house techniques we came across a new plug-in, mbFeatherTools, which enabled us to model a small amount of fur to exact specifications and then place thousands of instances of the fur over the character. Each of these could react to forces such as wind, turbulence and gravity to get the desired effect. If the character was far from camera, we reduced the number of instances and scaled them up to simplify the silhouette and maintain an illustrative look."

The 3D team's Rob Chapman on letting it snow

"All the snow effects were made with node-based visual development platform Autodesk Softimage ICE. We constructed a particle system that took the skier's speed and direction into account, using physical attributes such as wind, air resistance and turbulence to mimic the motion of large, drifting snow clouds."

Visual CV

In pictures: a guide to the career and work of our Technique writers

Marc Craste

Five of the director's finest moments



JoJo in the Stars – 2003

The poster advertising 12-minute short *JoJo in the Stars*.



Camelot, The Big Win – 2006

Part of the appeal of animation is creating believable worlds, regardless of their quirky nature.

08 Capturing the excitement of the **Winter Olympics** was crucial, so the character designs were about action and personality

09 Marc Craste's **initial pitch** images depict a snowy landscape that would be brought to life with Autodesk Softimage ICE

Influences

Illustration Jon Klassen, graphic novels, children's picture books, Jeff Soto – he plays a lot with geometric shapes, sometimes creating a bit of a CG look with extreme perspective.

Photography Bernd and Hilla Becher.

Film Alejandro Jodorowsky, live-action cinematography, Studio Ghibli – it creates the most imaginative, eccentric worlds and yet you can always relate to the characters.

Fashion Iris Apfel.

Literature Tom Robbins' *Jitterbug Perfume*.

Websites Google Image Search, Pencil Test Depot (www.penciltestdepot.com) – great animators' line tests for great movies.

Miscellaneous Nature, travelling, blue skies, Sibelius, coffee, biscuits, hard cash.



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"The glacier was done with a staggered series of explosions based on the timing of the initial impact when it gets hit by a curling stone. This made cracks appear across the glacier, defining the large chunks that would fall and then break into smaller pieces, which bounced off each other with simulated rigid body dynamics, contributing to a simulated particle smoke and cloud system that the camera passes through."

Will Eagar of the 3D team on props

"Other than the exploding glacier, it didn't take long to build the props. They were geometrically quite simple, and Jon supplied most of the textures in layered files. We used Softimage to build the trees – most of the trees in Jon's designs are fairly similar, so we only needed to make about 10 then duplicate them and vary some of the textures.

"When we first saw some of the skiing shots, the main character's texture seemed to disappear into the texture of the trees, so at the compositing stage we added a bit of low ground mist

to create some depth. This made the character stand out more and also helped with the clarity of the wolves."

Marc Craste on revisions and results

"It was originally suggested that an evil spirit should be encased in the glacier. This was designed in the form of a dragon-like serpent, but the client was keen to steer clear of monsters, so we chose a bear as something equally impactful, but more in keeping with the setting.

"I also had very different music in mind throughout the production. But as there was no specific syncing involved, having the music upfront wasn't necessary. In the end, various pieces seemed to fit with the images – the final piece was the one the clients felt was most appropriate.

"The BBC seems to be extremely happy with the end result, which is a real bonus from our point of view. Probably the one thing we would have liked on this project is more screen time to tell the story."



Guinness, *Seconds From Greatness* – 2007

A spot heavily influenced by the design of *JoJo in the Stars* – it's *JoJo* on steroids.



Varmints – 2008

Based on the book of the same name, this is an environmental fable for children.



Royal Opera House, *Stuck on a Sunday* – 2009

Commissioned as part of a feature development, this piece showcases a strange, bestial character who loves to laugh, dance and howl at the moon.